

Past Phasers and Pointed Ears:

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The Story of *Star Trek:* The RPG

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I remember exactly where I was the evening of September 8, 1966. If Perry Mason ever asks, I have my alibi ready. After 12 years of growing up with Tom Swift, Heinlein's Luna City, and Rocky Jones, I was more than ready for *Star Trek*.

As it turned out, it was just what I had wished for. From that time until June 1969, I rode along on every voyage of the U.S.S. *Enterprise*. After the last new episode was aired, there were reruns, then syndication, then an all-too-brief flirtation with an animated cartoon series. *Star Trek* grew more after its "death" than it ever did in life.

Since David Tepool, Greg Poehlein and I first met in the 1970s, our usual topics of conversation have been games, military history, heroic fantasy, and science fiction. *Star Trek* always figured prominently in that last category. Greg had been "trivia master" of a local STAR TREK interest group. Dave bemoaned the fact that no local station had showed *Star Trek* in a number of years, and that his young son Jason would grow up without the memories of the final frontier.

Back then, it never really occurred to any of us that we might have a chance to take a small part in the *Star Trek* legend. (I'm a dreamer, but I don't usually

dream quite that big . . .) For that reason, we were delighted when Jordan Weisman and Ross Babcock of FASA Corporation asked us to take a shot at turning *Star Trek* into a complete role-playing game universe.

To Dave, Greg and me, *Star Trek* was not and could not be just another game project. We had come to love *Star Trek*. We were most fortunate that Jordan and Ross felt the same way. They understood the importance of *Star Trek* to its fans, and knew that a casual exploitation of the name simply would not suffice.

On the other hand, *Star Trek* scared us a little. (A little? A lot!) Fantasilimations was a small company, established by the three of us as an independent design group. Our intent was to offer a complete design package on a job-by-job basis. FASA had already rejected the efforts of four previous design teams, and becoming Number Five would do nothing for our reputations in the industry.

Moreover, even if we could please FASA, could we please the legions of *Star Trek* fans? Never has a popular entertainment had such an active, organized, or vocal group of enthusiasts. The *Star Trek* community, by its acceptance or rejection of a *Star Trek* role-playing system, could make or break the system, the company, and the designers.

Ego and greed overcame fear. (How's that for honesty . . .) We took the assignment.

The design of *Star Trek: The Role-Playing Game* is not very representative of how such things are normally done. We faced the same time pressure and adaptation problems as did the designers of such efforts as *Call of Cthulhu* and *Thieves' World* (two game adaptations we much admire, by the way). Working on *Star Trek* made us appreciate the time and effort that goes into adapting someone else's visions and dreams into numbers, counters, and rules.

Star Trek presented its own problems as well. FASA is based in Chicago, while our Fantasilimations Associates group works out of Southern Indiana. Often, graphics and production work at FASA had to start on a section of the rules before the rules draft of that section was finished. This necessitated a change in word processing systems from TSR-80 to Apple II (for compatibility with FASA's equipment) and long hours on the telephone almost every night.

Jordan and Ross had several basic assumptions about the game from the beginning. They wanted a simple movement/combat system for man-to-man operations, absolute authenticity in all details of the *Star Trek* universe, and —

especially — a starship combat system that was not just a boardgame. Jordan and Ross visualized a true role-playing starship combat game that would bring a number of players into the action, making decisions as if they were actually on the bridge of the *Enterprise*.

We were all agreed on the subject of a simple combat system. Due to the subject matter, it had to appeal to many people who would be purchasing it as their first role-playing game. (A complex system is fine for experienced role-players, but it will scare away a newcomer.)

FASA inadvertently provided us with the solution to this problem even before we were offered the project. The assignment was given us at a gaming convention during conversations with Jordan and Ross. David, Greg and I had approached the FASA team at that event to congratulate them on the publication of *Grav Ball*. David and I had spent the evening before playing the game, and had fallen in love with its quick play and simple mechanics, particularly the action points system which was so easy to use.

It occurred to us that *Grav Ball*'s action points could be adapted for use in any movement/combat sequence where simplicity and fast play action were desired. Use of a square grid further simplified play. Even so, optional rules and the open-ended nature of action points provided potential for all the complexity and detail the experienced gamer could ask for. So nice of FASA to solve our problems before they even occurred!

The authenticity question required us to enlarge our already huge personal libraries of *Star Trek* lore. I think I reread every word of *Star Trek* text released in paperback, plus a number of magazine articles and other sources never collected in book form.

All the reading brought us to a conclusion — there was *no way* to reconcile every piece of *Star Trek* lore with every other piece! The material was itself full of speculation and contradiction. The series had any number of loose ends, but when the animated series, professional fiction, fan fiction, and "non-fiction" reference books were considered as well, the job became impossible. And what about reconciling *Star Trek*'s brand of science and astronomy with the *real* nature of the universe? It simply could not be done!

Some order of precedence had to be established when "facts" disagreed among various sources. We decided that

the original, final source of "truth" would be the episodes of the TV series itself. If the series specifically referred to something, it was taken as true. Even here there were problems, as a later episode would contradict something presented earlier. These inconsistencies were resolved on a case-by-case basis, according to the prevailing opinion of other sources and the fans themselves.

When a *Star Trek* "fact" could be substantiated by current scientific principles, we applied science. When science and *Star Trek* conflicted, we unashamedly adopted the *Star Trek* version. (The transporter and warp speed computation are two examples.) *Star Trek*'s scientific accuracy was better than any show of its time (or since, for that matter), but the occasional inaccuracy was often

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there to make a better story. In game design, reality often had to take a back seat in much the same way.

The primary source for the *Star Trek* version of the universe was Bjo Trimble's exhaustive work, *The Star Trek Concordance*. If Ms. Trimble's book had not existed, we would have been forced to correlate all this material ourselves. Under the time constraints we had, such a task would not have been possible. (The book is, sadly, out of print at this writing. Negotiations are under way to make it available once more, so watch your bookstores!) It became our design bible, and should be on the shelf of every *Star Trek* gamemaster.

Next in our line of priority were the concepts introduced in the animated series. We adopted those that had become accepted parts of the *Star Trek* legend, with one very notable exception — the Kzinti, as presented in the animated episode "The Slaver Weapon," by Larry Niven. It was our feeling that the Kzinti (and the long-dead Slaver race's stasis boxes) most properly belonged to Mr. Niven's *Known Space* series of SF works.

With holes still remaining in the fabric of the *Star Trek* universe, we turned to other sources of such lore. Where appropriate, questions about characters, facts,

and figures were answered by speculations in professionally written *Trek* fiction or other references. Some reference works, though, were full of inaccuracies and misconceptions when compared to the series episodes themselves. We mostly bypassed these works, figuring that our own speculations — based on what the series had established as fact — were as good or better.

We filled in some grey areas, particularly of character backgrounds and capabilities of equipment, by accepting the prevailing "fan wisdom" on such questions whenever we could. Sometimes there was no reconciling several sources, so we adopted one and hoped for the best. If you don't like the first name we gave Sulu, or want to change around the skill levels offered for a character, feel free! We do not pretend to be the final authority on all *Star Trek* questions — there is no final authority on legends. Certainly, the *Star Trek* universe has grown beyond the point that even creator Gene Roddenberry could hope to keep track of every detail.

In cases where there simply was no evidence for a point of fictional background, we left it out if it was not vital to game play, figuring that the individual gamemasters and players would have their own ideas on the matter anyway. Sometimes, however, there was a detail too important to ignore. What does a Gorn hand weapon look like, and how does it operate? How fast is an Orion pirate ship? How strong is a Tellarite? Does Uhura know how to pilot a shuttlecraft? When all else failed, we made it up, based on what we know about *Star Trek*, and what we felt was true to the nature of the characters and the universe.

We expect that some points in *Star Trek: The RPG*, and in future supplements to the game, will be disputed by some fans. If so, they can feel free to modify anything, or to ask questions about our ideas and decisions. We are attempting to embrace as many schools of thought as possible.

The requirement for a true role-playing starship combat system was perhaps the hardest to fulfill, but was certainly the most fun we had as designers. This section of the rules was dropped squarely in the lap of Dave Tepool; he, Jordan Weisman, and Ross Babcock are the ones to thank (or blame, as the case may be) for the results.

Dave and Jordan both believed that the game as a whole would suffer if starship tactical operations required switching from the group involvement of a role-

playing scenario to a simple boardgame format. They wanted to involve as many of the players as possible in the action and the decision making, capturing the feel of the *Enterprise* bridge and the tension of exciting combat sequences as shown in the episode "Balance of Terror" and in the movie *The Wrath of Khan*.

Dave established a set of "control consoles" on which counters would be moved to represent the allocation of energy to weapons, shields, and movement, and the extent of damage taken from enemy fire. Such systems had proven effective for various aircraft combat games in the past, allowing a lot of information to be considered with a minimum of rules complexity and player effort.

The skill level system was extended as well, allowing players to benefit from the extent of a character's experience in a particular area relating to starship combat operations. Saving rolls can be attempted by the engineer to simulate the efficient coordination of damage control parties, or by the science officer to establish a sensor lock-on and gain useful information about an enemy vessel's defenses or repair status.

The captain was given no console to work with. Instead, as in the series, his is the ultimate responsibility for ship and crew. The player who represents the captain must coordinate the efforts of his department heads and make the split-second life-or-death decisions of a commander in combat. The fate of his ship is not decided so much by die rolls and rules as by his ingenuity and courage. When early playtest sessions began to sound like the teaser of a series episode, we knew that Dave, Jordan, and Ross were on the right track.

The most fundamental assumption made about the game came the first day of discussions with Jordan and Ross — the game had to reflect the *Star Trek* universe in its design philosophy as well as its details. To make *Star Trek: The RPG* a Klingon shoot would be in violation of everything the series represented. Man-to-man combat and starship combat systems were important, and had to be done right, but these were to take a back seat to the essential human adventure of space exploration.

Star Trek reminded us in episode after episode that armed conflict was not inevitable among thinking beings. The Vulcan concept of IDIC — Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations — was an underlying theme that shaped the series and influenced the series' fans. If the game promoted the idea of settling every problem at phaser-point, it would

be a failure. It was this failing, more than any other, that had caused FASA to reject four previous design attempts. A design that couldn't look past phasers and pointed ears would not be acceptable.

For this reason, we have attempted to make *Star Trek: The RPG* reflect the *Star Trek* philosophy.

The adventures, both in the initial package and available separately, do not reward the "hack and slash" player. FASA and Fantasimulations Associates agreed from the start that the game required a different adventure approach, so *Star Trek* adventure scenarios will always feature conflict of a dramatic type, but not always combat. Sometimes combat cannot be avoided, but the Federation philosophy of nonviolence and noninterference will prevail in most situations.

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With a horde of well-read, intelligent, and sensitive *Star Trek* fans looking over our shoulders, we were aware that we had to take a little bit more care with the details of our design philosophy. In both the game and adventures, we took care to avoid male-centered or WASP-centered thinking. (Our largely female in-house playtest group kept us *very* honest on that first part.)

It would be nice to stop and take a reflective look back at this project — but we can't afford to slow down long enough! Having made a commitment to support the *Star Trek* system with adventures, supplements, and other game aid material, we are quite busy at our little keyboards. (Thank the Great Bird of the Galaxy for word processors!) At least two adventure supplements, two sets of deck plans, and perhaps a booklet or two of new ship designs should be available by the time you read this. Other works in progress include ship design rules, a trade and speculation supplement, and a whole game package on the Klingon Empire. The last item will be a comprehensive game aid boxed set allowing the player to create and play

Klingon player-characters.

Also, FASA has arranged with Paramount to license *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*. We will produce material under that license to bring the role-playing game up to date with the new movie series, including deck plans of the new *Enterprise*, the *Reliant*, and the Regula I space station. All the movie characters and other changes to the *Star Trek* universe will be prepared so that campaigns can be set in either period in the "future history" of *Star Trek*. We are very excited by the possibilities opened up in this way.

And the latest development is the granting of a license to FASA for production of *Star Trek* miniature game figures and miniature starships. The first starship miniatures will be available in July.

The deck plans and other game aids for *Star Trek* are scaled for the use of 15mm figures. (If we'd scaled the *Enterprise* plans for 25mm, you'd have needed a spare hangar deck just to lay them out!) But there are a lot of gamers and *Star Trek* fans who would prefer 25mm for more detail. (Speaking as a game retailer, 25mm figures are also easier to market . . .) This problem gave us fits until the folks at FASA came up with an elegant solution — produce both! The first 25mm character figures will be ready in July, with 15mm characters following in September. Eventually, we hope to see a wide assortment of ships, plus all the characters, aliens, and accessories you could ever want for adding a 3D effect to your *Star Trek* gaming.

Star Trek has literally changed the lives of its designers. Once isolated in a medium-sized southern Indiana city, we now travel all over the country, meeting fans at conventions and running demonstrations of the game system. We try to balance the travel with design time at home. In between (is there any in between?), we all hold full-time jobs, and try to fit in some game playing of our own. (Game design supports our game habit, but jobs pay rent. Life's like that . . .)

We love to hear from gamers and *Star Trek* fans, particularly if you want to exert a little influence on how the game system will develop. If you don't see us at conventions, write us c/o FASA, P.O. Box 6930, Chicago, IL 60680 (or try Fantasimulations Associates, P.O. Box 5541, Evansville, IN 47715.) Frankly, things have moved a little fast for three game freaks from Evansville. FASA handed us one of our dreams, and we aren't ready to wake up yet.